

Presbytery, politics and poetry: Maister Robert Bruce, John Burel and Elizabeth Melville, Lady Culross

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Third in the Protestant succession as minister of St Giles's, following John Knox and James Lawson, Maister Robert Bruce (c.1554-1631) is currently a somewhat neglected figure in Scottish history. Yet almost from the moment he found himself called to the senior charge in the capital in 1587, he enjoyed great prominence and influence. His sponsor for this most important pulpit in the country was none less than Andrew Melville who, with his nephew James, had been Bruce's main mentor as a mature student of divinity at St Mary's College in St Andrews University from 1583. James Lawson had died in London in 1584, whither he, and many other ministers, had fled from the Arran regime, which fell in November 1585. Robert Bruce had a call to St Andrews, and accepted St Giles's reluctantly, writing in old age that "well I knew the Court and we could never agree".¹ And after a few years' honeymoon, in which Bruce rose to great favour with the king, this was to prove cruelly true. Bruce's unflinching denunciations of aristocratic immorality, royal passivity and general backsliding gradually became too much for King James, and the famous Edinburgh riot of 17 December 1596 marked a definitive turning point.

Four years later, Bruce's refusal to wrong his conscience by proclaiming the king's complete innocence in the matter of the Gowrie Conspiracy marked the end of his Edinburgh ministry and public life. From August 1600, he was deprived of his charge, inhibited from preaching in the lowlands, and subjected to severe persecution by an unforgiving king. In 1616, Andrew Melville would write of Bruce as "that constant confessor

¹ David Calderwood, *History of the Kirk of Scotland*, 8 vols. (Edinburgh, 1842-49), iv, 637.

and almost martyr of the Lord Jesus Christ”² — and that was before the old man’s second exile to Inverness, the Siberia of early seventeenth-century Scotland, from 1622 to 1625. The death of King James finally enabled Bruce to live out his remaining days at his own house, Kinnaird, near Larbert. As a deeply committed Presbyterian disciple of the Melvilles, he remained an inspiration to the Presbyterian laity and clergy — the “Ladies of the Covenant” were his friends, and it is known that of future Covenanting leaders, Alexander Henderson, Robert Blair, John Livingstone and David Dickson were all disciples of Bruce, travelling sometimes not just to Kinnaird, but all the way to Inverness to sit at his feet and learn.

The outlines of Bruce’s life — one of awe-inspiring saintliness — were written up in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and there is no need to repeat readily available information here.³ Of modern historians, however, the only one to have taken a detailed interest in Robert Bruce is the American Arthur Williamson, in his epoch-making volume *Scottish National Consciousness in the Age of James VI* (Edinburgh, 1979). Williamson’s sources were sixteen sermons printed in 1843, along with the often substantial quotations given by Calderwood. His bibliography does not include McNicol’s *Master Robert Bruce*, which would have told him of the existence of a MS volume of further “thirty” (actually twenty-nine) sermons, totalling 338 closely written pages. Williamson had sparked my own interest in Bruce in 1997, when I began work on the Edinburgh poet and merchant burgess John Burel (c.1567-1603), who had clearly listened attentively to Bruce’s preaching.⁴ In August 2002 McNicol’s statement that the Bruce MS ends with “28 pages of verses of the type of

² Letter from Sedan, 25 May 1616, in Thomas McCrie, *Life of Andrew Melville*, 2nd edn., 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1824), ii, 529.

³ See *Sermons of Robert Bruce, with Collections for his Life by the Rev. Robert Wodrow*, ed. William Cunningham. (Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1843), 3-201; and R. D. McNicol, *Master Robert Bruce, Minister in the Kirk of Edinburgh*, (Edinburgh, 1907; reprinted Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1961).

⁴ See my “Passion, Poetry and Politics: John Burel and his surviving works” in *A Palace in the Wild*, edd. L. A. J. R. Houwen, A. A. MacDonald and S. L. Mapstone (Peeters, Leuven, 2000), 199-248, at 207-208.

the *Gude and Godlie Balladis*⁵ sent me to Edinburgh. I had hoped the verses might be unknown work by John Burel, an interesting poet whose extant work consists of one slim volume, published in late 1590.

Robert Bruce's influence on John Burel is powerfully confirmed by these twenty-nine sermons on Hebrews XI; but the poems in the MS are not Burel's work. What Burel has imbibed from Bruce is the "socio-political" message that attracted Arthur Williamson's attention: Scotland's desperate need for law and order, impartial justice, and freedom from both bloodfeud and the presence of any Catholic noblemen. Burel's *Aplication concerning our kings maiesties persoun*, referring to James's safe return from Denmark with his queen in May 1590, is direct:

Maist valiant Prence of nobill brute and fame:
Sen that his mercy did thy Schip mentene,
Gif praise to God, quho hes thy Pilot bene.

Forzet not for to thank him day and nicht,
Quho did thy interprise so weill aply,
And in this land his caus reverence richt
So far as it into thy handis dois ly,
Trators to God seik out and warly try:
Gud men mentene, and punish that opres,
So sall thy actions haif ane gud succes. (264-73)

The traitors to God are undoubtedly Catholics, especially of the religious turncoat variety, about whom Burel will have more to say in another poem later in his volume. He then moves on to the issue of true, impartial justice beloved of Bruce the preacher:

Sen God hes gevin the swourd into thy hand,
And thee promotit to ane Kingly place,
Lat justice likwais flurish into this land,
So sall the Lord bestow his gifts of grace;
In doing this, he sall mentene thy race,

⁵ McNicol, *Bruce*, 193-94.

And thou of all men sall receive commend,
With praise immortall to the warldis end.

As CLIOMINUS, King of Cret, be God
Wes for his justice estemat maist sure,
So let thy fame be likwais blawn abrod
In doing justice, baith to ritch and pure. (274-284)⁶

Williamson's discussion of Bruce's printed sermons in *Scottish National Consciousness* makes it very plain that the thunderous preaching of Bruce against bloodfeud and violence, involving much denunciation of the nobility's faults and of the king's inaction, was in fact fully in keeping with the wishes of the king, and more particularly, his secretary and chancellor, John Maitland of Thirlestane. Royal authority was being enhanced (as it very shortly would be in France under Henri IV) by centralising government and imposing royal law and order. Bloodfeud is a very ancient way of maintaining one form of local social order, and Scotland was far from the only European country where feuding was endemic. With the help of his clergy, whose pulpits were the "mass media" of the time, King James eventually succeeded in stamping it out in the lowlands of his realm. Bruce had no qualms about denouncing bloodfeud; he simply regarded it as a barbarous sin, and he adduced good Protestant theological grounds for his denunciation. For King James, on the other hand, it was doubtless sinful, but more importantly, it constituted a grave affront and serious threat to his royal authority and standing.

John Burel's work is invaluable to Scottish historians in showing how this message was received and transmitted in the secular world of Edinburgh's upwardly mobile merchant classes — both Burel and his brother-in-law James Aikinheid, son of a prominent elder of St Giles's, were married to Mowbrays of Barnbougall, a very old if minor aristocratic family. But it was to one of the greatest nobles in the land that the bourgeois Burel dedicated his published volume of 1590, Ludovic Stuart, second Duke of Lennox. Burel's admonitions to the king and his denunciations

⁵ Currently available only in the original print (Edinburgh, 1590). My Scottish Text Society edition of Burcl's volume is due in 2004.

of the nobility have their origins in Robert Bruce's preaching. As early as 1588 he was telling his congregation that

the great men in this country are become companions to thieves and pirates, oppressors, and manifest blasphemers of God and man. Ye see murder, oppression and bloodshed, is the only thing that they shoot and mark at. As to the simple sort of people, the prophane multitude, they are altogether godless; there is not sik a thing in them as ane natural light, whereby they may see God in his works, let be the supernatural ... the most part of this country is given over ... to prefer the leaven of the Pharisees and dregs of Papistrie, to the healthsome and blessed word of truth. ... crave that the Lord of his great mercy, in time, would prevent this utter extermination, quhilk this great confusion both in kirk and policie, so terribly threateneth and portendeth. ... of necessity either the magistrate, and in special the supreme magistrate, must put to his hand and make an end of this confusion, or else this confusion will make an end of him. Therefore, I say, join your prayer with me, that the Lord will ... give him grace and a bent [*i.e.* committed] will, to make his soul free of the iniquities of his nobles.

Look unto your trade, ye that are merchants; look unto your dealing, ye that are lawyers, how crooked or how straight ye be. Ye that are lords and judges, with what conscience ye proceed in your vocation. ... Be not deceived, as ye are come in this earth to serve and glorify him, so every ane of you in your own ranks and callings be upright. ... Then take heed to this terrible judgement; look in time, that out of time it overtake thee not with a terrible wakening! ... [The psalmist] bringeth in God here after the manner of earthly judges ... for first they sit down, they try, seek out, and advise, and after advisement they rise up, give forth the judgement, and pronounce the sentence.

The Lord is not yet risen in this country. And why hath he sitten but to see gif his enemies will repent? And hath this taken effect? No; for he hath not greater enemies in no part than the great men of this country, where his Word is so clearly uttered. ... What are they doing? They are burning and scalding, slaying and murdering, and using all kind of oppression, and raging so as there were not a king in Israell! ...

Assuredly, the Lord shall be revenged upon the iniquities of the great men of this country, whose sins do so abound.⁷

And here is John Burel, evoking Hell in another of the poems he published in 1590:

Heir is the house of miserie,
Quhair the condamnd remains,
 Quhair sauls dois duyne and neuer die,
In sempiternall pains:
Tormentit, and rentit,
Without regard or grace,
Sum lying, sum crying,
Nane to support thair cace.

Ye Potentats and Prencis,
That thinks it na offensis,
To leid your lyuis in lust,
 And ye Homiciders,
Ye scorners and deriders,
And ye that wrangs the iust:
 Ye Brigans and ye Bougrers,
Ye spoilzers of the pure,
 Ye false Iudgis and Occrers,
And ye murdrers obdure:
Sum day now, I say now,
Thir torments ye sall taist,
Vnles you, adres you,
For to repent in haist.

Adultrers and disauers,
Backbyters, misbehauers,
Stand awe for till offend,
 Ye spoilzears of the fatherineles,
And robbers of the motherles,

⁷ Cunningham, *Bruce's Sermons*, 288-89, 310-314.

Vnto this taill attend:
And ye vacabonds maist vane,
And drunkards of all pairts,
And ye hypocreits prophane,
That hes disaitful hairs:
All tyms ay, thir cryms ay,
Be bissie til amend,
In meriting and heriting,
The heuins into the end.

Ze that your lands delapidats,
And all your act[i]ons agitats,
In sick prophane affairs,
Ze Bludsheders and burious all,
Iust Canibals, men may you call,
As weill your deids declairs:
Thou bluddy man that dois abuse
Thy glore bot, and thy grace,
Quhat can thou find for thy excuse,
At the tribunall place:
Thy scusis, and rusis,
Sall serue for na effect,
Bot rather, sall further,
Thy knaifre to detect.⁸

homo homini Lupus

Robert Bruce, on taking up his Edinburgh charge, had immediately become a favourite of the king and Maitland. When they left Scotland for six months in October 1589, to cross the stormy seas to Norway and fetch home the king's new bride, they left Robert Bruce as one of the *de facto* regents of the country. The king conferred a life pension on Bruce before he left, and to the end of his days Bruce preserved the now lost letter in which the monarch told him he was worthy of the quarter of his kingdom.

⁸ *The Secovnd Passage of the Pilgremer*, available in H.H.Wood, ed., *Watson's Choice Collection*, STS 4th series, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1977-1991), i, poem 22. See above, n.3.

He received several (extant) letters from both James and Maitland while they were in Denmark. Bruce would play a leading role in the new queen's coronation at Holyrood on 17 May 1590. He also preached the sermon in St Giles's before the new queen two days later, during her *Joyeuse Entrée* (about which Burel wrote his sole moderately well-known poem).⁹ Bruce's text was taken from Psalm 107, which contains plenty of verses about stormy seas. Burel's *Aplication* directly refers to verse 29, "He turneth the storm to calme, so that the waves thereof are still":

His devine power, quhilk ever sall indure,
Can calm gret storms, and make thame to be still (236-37)¹⁰

It seems quite likely that in this poem Burel is echoing that now lost sermon. If so, it clearly contained Bruce's usual ration of direct admonition to the "magistrat".

The year after Burel completed his book of verse, Robert Bruce was preaching on the Epistle to the Hebrews as his "ordinar text", i.e. going right through the book, sermon after sermon. This standard practice might be interrupted by "byordinar" sermons for special occasions, and we have several such by Robert Bruce — such as a public thanksgiving (for the defeat of the Armada), a public act of penitence (by the Earl of Bothwell), and of course, a Communion season, which came only twice a year. In almost every Hebrews XI sermon, Bruce refers back to its predecessor — "as ye heard yesternight", or some such formula. They can be dated to April and May 1591, both from their topical references, and bibliographically. In 1740, at Glasgow, was printed "a sermon preached at Edinburgh in 1591 by the Rev. Mr Robert Bruce" on Hebrews XII:1. This is confirmed by references to God's "having placed a great work in his [King James's] hand presently, a work concerning the purging of his country and land of a gross devilry ... wherein the devil has been so bold

⁹ See above, n.8: *A Discriptioun ... of the Entrie* is poem 21.

¹⁰ See above, n.4.

as to enterprise so highly against religion, his person and the country".¹¹ And Calderwood notes that Bruce preached on Hebrews XII:14 and 15 on 6 June 1591.¹² Yet McNicol, the only commentator on the MS sermons, shows that the 1591 sermon on Hebrews XII:1, "forms an exact sequel to the last of our series on Heb.XI", but bizarrely insists that the latter were preached "between 1592 and 1596".¹³

Bruce's sermons are fully worthy of the grandeur of Hebrews XI. Kirkton wrote that Bruce "made always an earthquake upon his hearers"; John Livingstone, in his autobiography, paid astonishing homage to Bruce's preaching: "Mr Robert Bruce I severall times heard, and in my opinion never man spoke with greater power since the apostles' days".¹⁴ The Hebrews XI sermons are a huge treasure trove, verbatim transcripts of Bruce in the pulpit in St Giles's. They add a great deal to our awareness, both of the period, and of our understanding of a remarkable spiritual teacher. The North Berwick witchcraft trials were in full swing, but Bruce has almost nothing to say about them. In a sermon dealing with God's temptation (trying) of Abraham in verses 17 to 19, Bruce discusses various types of temptation:

The devill to begin at him, he temptis evir for evill ... to distroy thee, to deceave thee, and to snair thee for evir. ... He has ane desyre to sift everie cristiane. ... But the Lord interponis his power and his mercie, and disappoyns that cruell drift of the devill, and sumtyme soone, and sutyme lait, he takis them out of the devillis mouth and out of his hand, that wer under service to him all thair lyftyme. As for exampills, their ar ovir manie visibill spectaclis of this in our natioun now befoir oure eyis. For quhat mater gif the devill went about covertlie by

¹¹ Cunningham, *Bruce's Sermons*, 396-97. Bruce was to be a member of the commission appointed "to discover wizards and witches and examine them under torture" in October 1591. *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, iv, 680; see Julian Goodare, "The Framework for Scottish Witch-hunting in the 1590s", *Scottish Historical Review*, 81 (2002), 240-50.

¹² Calderwood, *History*, v, 129.

¹³ McNicol, *Bruce*, 194.

¹⁴ Quoted by McNicol, *Bruce*, 41, 178.

affectiounis, to setill his kingdome in the hairtis of men, bot now he hes gone oppinlie to work, he hes castin af his mask, and makis the most paire of the cuntrie oppinlie to renunce god, visiblie manifesting himself to them, deluding their sencis, and makis them wittinglie and willinglie to renunce chrys and thair baptisme. No doubt he hes done this upone that intent, that both bodie and saull shold be his forevir. ... [Yit] I doubt not bot he sall be disappoyneted in sindrie of those that ar presently takin Suppose thir pure people have fallin verie uglye, and gone to ane plane apostacie neir unto petirs, yit it pleased the Lord in the end to inlichtin the mynds of them Brethererin ye haue this to considdir of all rankis and estaitis, that ye carie ane commoun nature with miserabill cativis, ane common conditioun naturall with the miserabill bodeis of these that have bene so long sclavis to the devill, and in quhom he hes sic power. And theirfoir ascryve not to nature, nor to the forcis theirof, that the devill hes not als great dominiouen visibill in yow as he hes in them, but in the speciaill grace of god quhairof ye ar yit ignorant, and it enterit nevir in your hairtis to think upone that grace, that hes exeimed yow from that terribill sclaverie; seing by nature they ar in als gude ane conditioun, that ar not exeimed from it. Your unthankfulnes to god quho hes so liberallie dealt with yow must procure ane michtier devill to posses yowand he is so mekill the worss to be expelled the more invisiblie he dwellis in yow. Thairfoir crave thankfull hairtis that ye may be twitchit with the sence of this great mercie, that hes fred yow from that snair, quahirin utheris be nature als gude haue fallin. And beseik god, that quhen ye sie thir spectaclis, they pas not without proffeit. (fo. 68rv)

When we consider that at this very time, a furious King James had brought an assize of error against those who had failed to send Barbara Napier to the stake,¹⁵ these words of Bruce's are humane indeed.

Bruce speaks not only with compassion, but even with humour, using homely proverbs to great effect. Speaking of the uncertainty of the hour of death, for example, Bruce tells his hearers:

¹⁵ See Williamson, *National Consciousness*, 48-9.

It is said your proverb, als sone cumis the lambis skin to the mercat as the ald scheipis. (fo. 91)

Of course, there *are* thunderous, magnificent crashes of righteous anger, as Bruce denounces contemporary scandals winked at by authority, from the king down. Not for nothing did one who heard him, Mr William Scot, recall “that trumpet-sound by which the walls of Jericho were overthrown”.¹⁶ Bruce explicitly states in his sermons, that Scotland, granted the revelation of sin and salvation, was now backsliding into darkness. Again and again he complains that the magistrates are not doing their jobs in the light of the Gospel. In a passage very reminiscent of the verses from John Burel quoted earlier, Bruce asks:

Except ye haitt evil, how can ye punische it? And except evill be punischit, how can justice stand, how can thow be a faithfull magistrat? Agane, except I defend gude men, promove gud men, reward godlines and vertew, how sall I be ane faithfull magistrate? ... How is it possible bot that the cuntrie man be ovirgone with evill? And gude men sall not be sure of ane retrait, seing there is not ane man with the sword in his hand to punische evill. So quhair thir affectiounis ar not in the magistratis superiour or inferiour, that policie and commounweill can not stand, and this makis me to think that of force our commounweill man decay ... Except God put in the hairet of the magistrat ane better and greater affectioun, quhairout may spring ane better executioun, both in punisching of evill and advancing of godlines, it is not possible bot that the confusioun sooner nor we luik for sall ovirtak us. (fo. 159v)

Again and again, we hear Bruce’s lively awareness of divine wrath, and of the need to avoid behaviour that will call down judgment. His own conversion, of which we possess his written account, was the result of a terrifying realisation of the reality of his own sinfulness and how his conscience accused him before God. The experience, in the “new laft chalmer” at the family seat of Airth Castle in Stirlingshire, on 31 August

¹⁶ *Apologetical Narration of the State and Government of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1846), 26.

1581, led him to the light of Christ.¹⁷ It also gave him an abiding, clearheaded awareness that sin had to be fought at all times and in all places. Preaching on verse 30, Bruce says of human life:

Theirfoir let no man cast himself in ane securitie, to think that his battel is endit so long as he livis heir. No, the stumpis and ruitis of sin remaine ay in the haire of man, quhilk sprout and ryse againe ... so we have ane continuall battel againes the dreggis of wickednes. (fo. 145v)

Weeks earlier, preaching on verse 1, he had said of the heart:

It is not eneuch that the haire getis a thrist and a desyre to attain to mercie. Bot the Lord man work ane assurance in thy conscience that God will be mercifull and is alreadie mercifull, and will declair his mercie to thee on that great day. (fo. 6)

These two themes, the need for assurance and the danger of false security, he often returns to. And they haunt the work of the other poet in whom we find clear traces of Bruce's spiritual teaching, the poet whose work is physically linked with the 29 sermons on Hebrews XI.

The 28 pages of poetry at the end of the MS are written in the same beautiful professional hand as the sermons. There are no colophons nor dates anywhere in the volume, but the first poem is a sonnet, headed "Ane Anagram - SOB SILLE COR", "cor" being Latin for that "heart" of which Bruce constantly speaks.

*Sob sille cor, since lyke ane pilgrime pure
Thou lives below and can not sie thy love
Och wounded haire quho soll thy seiknes cure
Sin hes thee slaine thow braithis to be above
Och sorrowing saull that murnis and wold remove
Braik throw those bondis assay thyself and flie
That efter paine those pleasuris thou may prove
That in his word that prince hes promis'd thee*

¹⁷ Calderwood, *History*, iv, 635-38.

Chryst is thy King, none hes thy hairet bot he
He is not heir then lerne for to lament
Pearce throw those cludis and seik untill thou sie
That sicht so swet that sall thy saull content:
Heir is thy hell and sin assaillis thee sore
Sob sille cor and grone to sie that glore. (fo. 170v)

For a week or so after my initial reading and transcribing of these poems in September 2002, I could extract no name from “*Sob sille cor*”. And then, for quite another academic purpose, I happened to open *Ane Godlie Dreame*, a long narrative poem published in 1603 by Elizabeth Melville, Lady Culross. The mystery was solved. For the Bruce MS poems speak in identical terms and phrases, even whole lines and parts of stanzas. *Sob sille cor* spells *Isbel Colros*. It is not a very good anagram, but she must have been determined to feature it, in order to place her “signature” at the head of this MS collection of her poems. The neologism “cor” rather spoils a fine sonnet, and it never reappears in her poetry.

Ane Godlie Dreame is not at present much known. Indeed, there is no modern edition. But it was many times reprinted right down to 1738, one of the most popular pieces of Scottish literature ever. Enlightenment Scotland, however, had no time for it. David Laing’s scholarly reprint (1828) of the 1603 first edition, was itself reprinted in 1878, and a second scholarly edition of the poem appeared in 1902. But it is some measure of how unread Lady Culross was in 1907, even amongst the godly, that McNicol, and the then owner of the Bruce MS, the Rev John Sturrock,¹⁸ thought the poems anonymous, for they are loud with echoes — or rather prefigurings — of *Ane Godlie Dreame*. These 29 poems, in many different metres and forms, are self-examinations, self-condemnations, tear-drenched prayers sobbing and groaning with despair and, rather less frequently, expressing Christian hope. Lady Culross appears to have worked all this material up into her masterpiece by the simple, brilliant addition of a central, controlling conceit — the narrative of the spiritual journey of a pilgrim soul from a

¹⁸ Sturrock read Scots poetry. A pencil note against one poem says “Gude and Godlie Ballatis, p. 210”, a reference to David Laing’s 1868 edition of the 1578 print of that work.

hellish earth to the bourne of heaven, down through hell back to a fallen world against which the soul can now successfully fight, sure in the knowledge of salvation. *Ane Godlie Dreame*, a mini-epic in 480 lines of masterly late Scots verse, was almost certainly the inspiration for Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is the most impressive (extant) non-Gaelic poem written by a woman in Scotland until the twentieth century. In our deeply gender-conscious age, however secular it may be, one would have thought that *Ane Godlie Dreame*'s female authorship alone would have attracted a very great deal more attention than it so far has.

But ignorance of Scotland, Scottish culture, history and the Scottish religious context in which Lady Culross wrote *Ane Godlie Dreame* is almost as great outwith Scotland as within.¹⁹ And familiarity with all those contexts is essential if we wish to grasp what drove Lady Culross to write. Robert Bruce's sermons — both printed and MS — are highly relevant here, for just as John Burel seems to echo Bruce's "socio-political" observations, Lady Culross's work reveals many links with the "spiritual" issues so painstakingly dissected by Bruce. One tiny example must suffice here:

Learne to give God the first place. Ffor as he is ane spirit, so he will be servit in spirit, and with the affectioun of the hair, and he comptis all the service of the bodie abhominatioun, quhair the affectioun of the haire is withdrawin. (fo. 71v)

And here is Lady Culross:

1. Give me thy hairet and I desyre no more
sayis chryst my spous and harkin quhat I say
I am a spirit then must thou me adore
in treuth and spirit if thow wold me obey

¹⁹ The Canadian David Mullan has done scholars a singular service with his massively documented *Scottish Puritanism 1590-1638* (Oxford, 2000), and the American Margo Todd likewise with *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (London, 2002). However, these works sadly have almost nothing to say about "culture" in the traditional sense.

...

3. The outward man availlis nothing at all
and is bot dead except the haire begin
give with thy haire tho it be nevir so small
the wedow with a mytt my love did win
knock with the haire and thou sall enter in
pray with the haire and then thou sall have store
of my haire blude to wasche away thy sin
give me thy haire, of thee I ask no more.

(IV, 1-4, 17-24; fo. 172)²⁰

The 29 poems range from a splendid dixain through three short sonnet sequences to massive meditations (including various “sacred parodies” of secular songs) on man’s, and above all the author’s, spiritual condition.²¹ Lady Culross was a younger daughter of Sir James Melville of Halhill, the diplomat and memoirist, one of the several distinguished sons of Sir John Melville of Raith, and adopted son of Henry Balnaves of Halhill, that doughty friend of John Knox.²² Elizabeth must have been born in the late 1570s, and before February 1597 she was married to John Colville of West Comrie, son of Alexander, Commendator of Culross.²³ If in 1599 she was described in print as “Lady Cumrie”, in 1603 she was “M.M. gentelwoman in Culross” and in 1604 “Lady Culross younger”.²⁴ Her brother in law Robert Colville succeeded John Dykes as minister of Culross

²⁰ The Roman numeral is the poem’s number in my edition.

²¹ My edition of her *Poems and Letters* will be published in 2004. It includes all her extant verse and letters, and the four written to her by Samuel Rutherford from his Aberdeen exile in 1636-37. She was related, by marriage, to John Burel, who also wrote a long dream vision about a pilgrimage beyond the bounds of earthly life; see above, n. 6.

²² *Memoirs of His Own Life*, ed. T. Thomson (Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1827).

²³ National Archives of Scotland, RD1/59, fo. 96v, a deereet arbitral coneerning the Melvilles of Halhill and the Balfours of Montquhany, witnessed by “John Colvile fear of Comrie”.

²⁴ By Alexander Hume (see above, n.17); 1st and 2nd editions of the *Dreame*.

in 1593.²⁵ On Robert Colville's death, Elizabeth wrote to John Livingstone in 1631 that Colville had served as "our deir pastour ... to me not only a pastour and a brother, bot, under God, a husband and a father to my children" — a comment which speaks volumes about the man she was married to. John Colville appears to have been a weak man and a poor estate manager. Lady Culross died in 1640.²⁶

Elizabeth Melville's extant poetry seems almost entirely to eschew even oblique comment on topical issues, making dating rather difficult. But the 29 poems in the Robert Bruce MS read like the monuments of a "conversion experience", a traumatic struggle for spiritual "assurance". Robert Bruce advised his congregation to keep written records of their spiritual life: "lat these particular experiences of godis mercie and favour towards yow be registrat not onlie in ane buik, as I wold have them, bot also in your hairtis" (MS fo.163). So did Alexander Hume, the minister of Logie in Stirlingshire from August 1597, a writer who published both prose and verse.²⁷ Anti-episcopalian like Robert Bruce, Alexander Hume was also a minor aristocratic second son who had trained as a lawyer in Scotland and France. From his published writings we can learn something of Elizabeth Melville. We know he had read Lady Culross's early poetry, for in dedicating to her his own *Hymnes, or Sacred Songs, wherein the right use of Poesie may be espied* (Edinburgh, 1599), he wrote:

I knowe ye delite in poesie yourselfe; and as I vnfainedly confes, excelles any of your sexe in that art, that euer I hard within this nation. I haue seene your compositiones so copious, so pregnant, so spirituall, that I doubt not but it is the gift of God in you.²⁸

²⁵ Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanae*, v, 13. Latterly Colville was assisted by Robert Melville, Elizabeth's own brother.

²⁶ Letter in W.K. Tweedie, ed., *Select Biographies*, Wodrow Society (Edinburgh, 1845), i, 358; letter to her son James, 30 January 1629, and note of a letter inviting Rev. John Ker of Prestonpans to her funeral, both Edinburgh University Library, Laing MSS, Laing III.347.

²⁷ *Hymnes and Sacred Songs*, ed. Alexander Lawson, Scottish Text Society, 1st series (Edinburgh and London, 1902), 120. (*Ane Briefe Treatise of Conscience*, ch.8, ll. 144-48).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, dedication "To the faithful and vertuous ladie, Elizabeth Melville", 4.

Earlier, Hume had spoken of Melville as one of “the Godly & elect Ladies in this our age ... euen a Ladie chosen of God to bee one of his saincts”, adding

It is a rare thing to see a Ladie, a tender youth, sad, solitare, and sanctified, oft sighing & weeping through the conscience of sinne. Would to God that all the Ladies of this Land, especially they of the greatest ranke, were of the like modest and godlie dispositioun: for the most part of them we see, to delite mair in couetousnes & in oppresioun of the puire for the entertainement of their pride ... Let such women remember that a day they shall appeare & give a compt before the judgement seat of Christ, and shall receaue a rewarde in their bodies according to their works.

To Elizabeth Melville, however, Hume says reassuringly “yee live more in murmuring and in paine: Therefore yee shall rejoice eternallie”. Hume sincerely admired Melville’s poetry, which perfectly embodies the prescriptions for Christian poetry set out in his “Epistle to the Scottish youth”, dated 1594, printed in the *Hymnes* immediately after the dedication:

Such as have the art or vaine poetike, of force they must shew themselues cunning followers of the dissolute ethnike poets ... Alas for pittie! Is this the right vse of a Christian talent to incense the burning lustes of licentious persons by such euill examples and allurements? ... rather bestowe thy gude gifts to the right vse, to wit, to the glory of God, and to the weil of thy brethren ... which thou sall do when by thy poesie or prose thow declares the mercie, the iustice, the power, the providence, the wisedome, the holines, the gudenes, or wondrous works of thy God vnto the world: whereof thow may haue so large a field in the scriptures. ... If thou would meditate on this spirituall subject, and exercise thyselfe in the Law of the Lord with continuance, thou should with time alter thy fleshlie affectiounes, and nourish thy spirituall gifts. (pp.6-8)

In two of the Bruce MS poems, Melville refers to herself as “young in yeiris”. It is possible that Melville in fact read Hume’s prescriptions in MS and took them entirely to heart. Hume’s dedication is dated 16 Februarie 1599, and there he still describes Melville as a “youth”. Given that Hume’s

own poems clearly date from before December 1594, the occasionally remarkable similiarities with Melville's are either coincidence (which given their shared mindset and its homogenous vocabulary is far from impossible), or they mean that Melville knew Hume before he moved to Logie in August 1597. We can assume that Hume at least occasionally heard Robert Bruce preach; he was certainly present on 17 December 1596, and presumably one of "the well-affected noblemen, gentlemen, and citizens" assembled in the East Kirk that day.²⁹ Hume certainly remained very close to Melville, and in his will of August 1609 he specifically left her his love, Christian affection and blessing.

At present, all we know of Bruce's attitude to poetry is Calderwood's report³⁰ that in Inverness, Bruce once preached that "a drink of wyne, or Wallace booke to read upon" was no "meet physicke" for "the dolour of the mind". Hume would have entirely endorsed this. However, the fact remains that 29 poems by Elizabeth Melville are copied into the last 28 pages of a volume of sermons by Robert Bruce, not Alexander Hume. (Culross, and still more Comrie, are closer to Bruce's home at Kinnaird than to Logie.) Although the various scriptural quotations that head some of the poems include two from Hebrews XII, the poems make no specific reference to Hebrews XI. But they relate, sometimes strikingly, to certain spiritual issues raised by Bruce — faith, conscience, the Christian life as a pilgrimage, the Christian battle, the individual's need to take up his cross, and so forth. The impression is that Lady Culross drew from these sermons those messages which immediately concerned her own inner life at a critical stage. Almost every single poem struggles from self-accusation and fear towards an almost defiantly affirmative conclusion, although the general oppressive atmosphere definitely lightens as the sequence proceeds, reaching what seems like definitive affirmation in a singing shout, clearly written to some dancing tune now unknown:

22. Ye sanctis most deir
nou chainge your cheir

²⁹ Lawson, *Hymnes*, 179.

³⁰ Calderwood, *History*, vii, 566.

lay of your murning weed
for chryst your king
glade newis doth bring
 imbrace the same with speid
mount up above
and sie your love
 to meit him in the air:
Lo quhair he standis
with streiched handis
 to mak yow welcum thair.

23. Be not affraid
nor yit dismaid
 thoucht ye have sinfull beine.
His blude most deir
hes wascht yow cleir
 and maid yow pure and cleine:
stand not in aw
althocht the law
 ye could in nowayis keip,
for lo the Lamb
hes keipt the sam
 and saift his sinfull scheip.

24. The prince of hell
dar not rebel
 Againes yon lord and King
rejoyce, rejoice
with hairt and voce
 And prasis to him sing
all laud and glore
for evirmore
 Be to his majestie
the King of Kingis
that livis and ringis
 Ffor evir praised be. (XVII, 253-288; fo. 182)

But this is immediately succeeded by an immense, untitled poem (432 lines, in 54 stanzas), which precedes the final sequence of seven sonnets:

1. O senceles saull quhair art thou now
 art thou alyve or dead?
O pensive spirit can this be thow
 that takis so litill head?
Alace is their no more remeid?
 bot for to die in sin?
quhair is the spirit that did thee lead
 quhen thow with joy did rin?
2. O fulische flesche thou did him greive
 in word in deid and thocht
and forced him to tak his leive
 that sic ane work had wrought.
Now all appeiris to be for noucht
 and thou art gone almost
alace thow was to deirlie boucht
 to be so lichtlie lost. (XVIII, 1-16; fo. 182)

To this voice, another replies in tones of exhaustion:

3. My saull is seik my flesche is waik
 now may I ficht no more
I have no strenth to strick ane straik
 thoucht sin sould me devore.
Quhair I was wont to stryve full sore
 and tak ane litill paine
now all is gone alace theirfoir
 and I bot dead and slaine. (17-24)

This second voice is as neurotically insecure and despairing as anything met with earlier. But the first voice argues steadily against this despair, calmly and rationally, and its last words, in stanza 52, are enormously significant:

Assure thy self that secreat grace
that now thy saull doth crave
quhither he schyne or hyde his face
it sall thee nevir leave.

That spirit of treuth can not deceave,
thoucht feilling flow and fleit:
no, nothing sall thy saull bereave
of this hir pledge so sweit. (409-16; fo. 183v)

The key word is “assure”, which we have heard only once before, some two thousand lines earlier:

Perplexit saull thought thou be sore opprest
yt hope in god and thou sall comfort find
assure thy self that all turns for the best
thy paine is heir thy pleasure is behind
doubt not of grace suppose that thou hes sin'd
the Lamb hes payit the prycethoxt they wer mo. (VI b, 1-6; fo. 173)

If we knew more of Elizabeth Melville's early life, it might be possible to show that Robert Bruce was her spiritual counsellor, or father in God, who saw her through that terrible experience of seeking assurance. No Melville of Halhill family papers appear to be extant, the whereabouts of Colville papers are unknown, and Bruce's great “Narrative” of his own life survives only in fragments. Almost the only time we have actual evidence of Bruce and Melville in each other's company is at the very end of Bruce's life. In June 1630, both were present at the famous communion season at Shotts, when Melville was instrumental in getting her young friend and protégé John Livingstone to preach at the Monday of thanksgiving, to tremendous effect — over 500 people were converted. And again, in one of her extant letters to Livingstone, dated 17 June 1631,³¹ she talks of having been at Airth and Kinnaird, so we may assume she saw Robert Bruce then, just over two months before he died.

³¹ Tweedie, *Select Biographies*, i, 360.

But perhaps the most interesting indication that Lady Culross was highly aware of Robert Bruce is from 1603: *Ane Godlie Dreame* makes slightly curious statements about the persecution of the “sillie Sancts” by “tirranes”. In 1603, the real oppression of the radical ministry by the king had not begun, and the only “innocent saint” suffering tyranny was Robert Bruce. He would continue to suffer it for many years to come, but the spiritual influence he would continue to exercise over the future of the Scottish Kirk would be far greater than his sufferings: Andrew Melville himself wrote in 1616 of the “almost martyr” that “I never remember him and his without comfort and heart lift up to God”.³² The words with which Lady Culross ends both her closing sonnet sequence and the entire collection of poems in the Bruce MS speak in tones which Robert Bruce would have happily made his own:

Tak courage then and be no more so sad
lift up your hairet your heritage is hie
rejoyce in god his grace soll mak yow glad
your lot is riche as ye soll schortlie sie
be warr to doubt thocht ye in danger be
ficht still in faith thought sin doth sore assaill
Chryst hes ou’rcum and rignis triumphantlie
his strenth is yours his prayer can not fail
thocht Sathan sift he nevir soll prevaill
hold fast your hope your sorrow soon soll ceas
the Lamb of god hes set on yow his seall
his blissed blude soll fill your saull with peace.
be not cast doun think on that endles lyfe
that glorious croun is worth ane greater stryfe.

Finis amen Laus deo (XIX h)

Edinburgh

³² See above, n.2.

